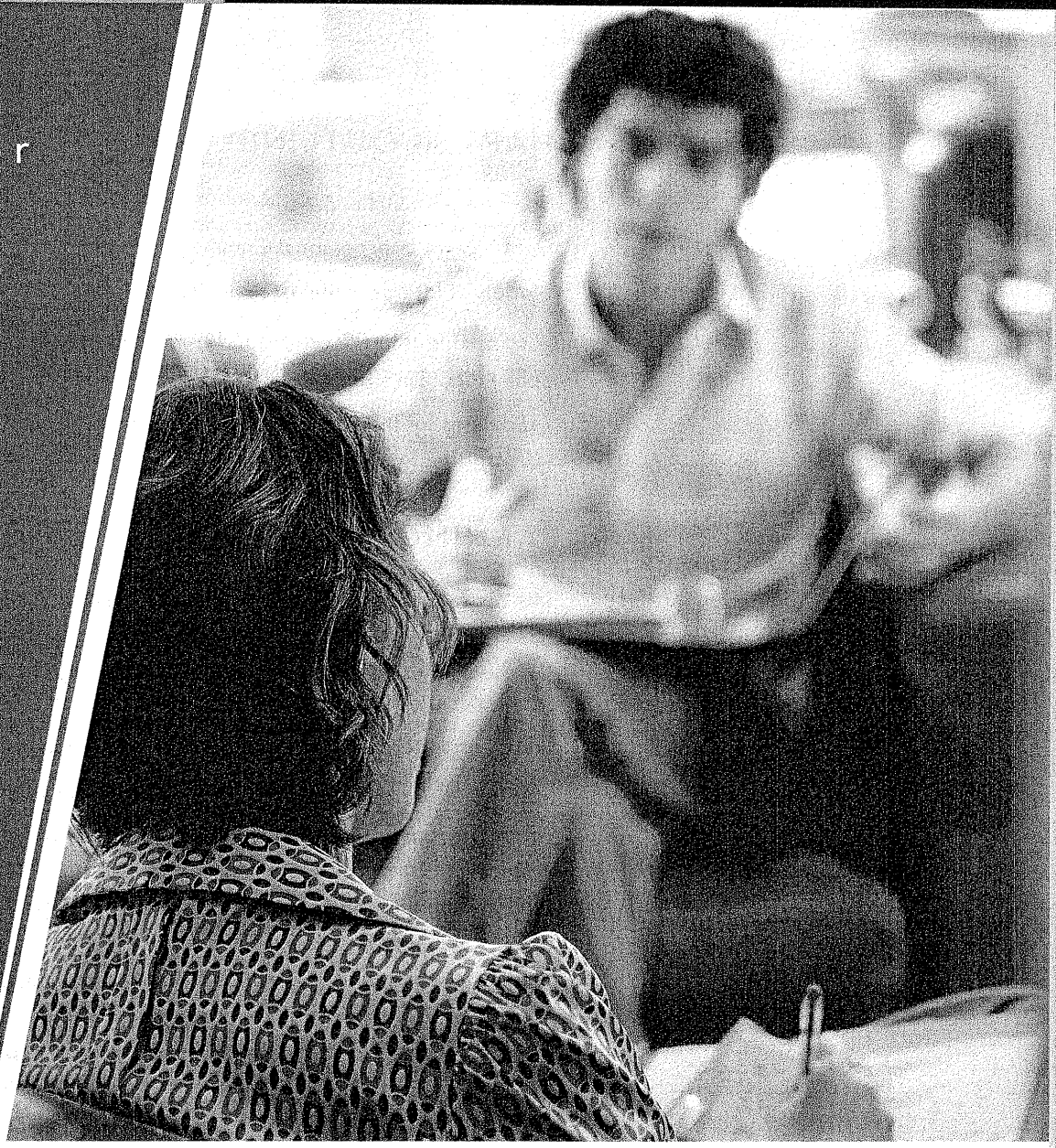
chapter

ONE



sirtravelalot/Shutterstock.com

A FIRST LOOK AT INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

CHAPTER OUTLINE

The Interpersonal Imperative

Definition of Interpersonal Communication

Models of Interpersonal Communication

Principles of Interpersonal Communication

Social Media in Everyday Life

Guidelines for Interpersonal Communication Competence

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

List the range of needs that people try to meet through interpersonal communication.

Give examples of the three types of relationships in Buber's view of communication.

Identify the key features that define interpersonal communication.

Distinguish content and relationship levels of meaning.

Apply the transactional model of interpersonal communication to a specific interaction.

Recognize eight principles behind effective interpersonal communication.

Explain how the definition of interpersonal communication and its features apply to social media.

Apply the guidelines discussed in this chapter to assess communication competence in a particular interaction.

MindTap®

Read, highlight, and take notes online.

You've been interviewing for 2 months, and so far you haven't gotten a single job offer. After another interview that didn't go well, you text a friend. Instead of a terse response, your friend texts back to suggest getting together for lunch. Over pizza, you disclose that you're starting to worry that you won't ever get hired. Your friend listens closely and lets you know he understands how you feel and he isn't judging you. Then he tells you about other people he knows who also haven't yet gotten job offers. All of a sudden, you don't feel so alone. Your friend reminds you how worried you felt

last term when you were struggling with your physics course and then made a B on the final. As you listen to him, your sagging confidence begins to recover. Before leaving, he tells you about a virtual interview website that allows you to practice interviewing skills, and he works with you to communicate more effectively in interviews. By the time you leave, you feel hopeful again.

Interpersonal communication is central to our everyday lives. We count on others to care about what is happening in our lives and to help us celebrate good moments and deal with problems and disappointments (Galvin, Braithwaite, & Bylund, 2014). In addition, we need others to encourage our personal and professional growth. Friends and romantic partners who believe in us enable us to overcome self-defeating patterns and help us become the people we want to be. Coworkers who give us advice and feedback help us increase our effectiveness on the job. And sometimes we just want to hang out with people we like, trust, and have fun with.

In the workplace, interpersonal communication is critically important. A 2010 national survey of employers reported that 89% of employers consider that college students should focus on learning to communicate effectively orally and in writing in order to be successful professionally (Rhodes, 2010). Similarly, in 2012 employers said that key qualities for job applicants were interpersonal skill, oral communication skill, and adaptability (Selingo, 2012). The following year, another survey showed that 93% of employers think a job candidate's demonstrated capacity to think critically and communicate clearly is more important than the focus of his or her undergraduate studies (Hart Research Associates, 2013). Finally, a 2016 survey reported that regardless of their chosen professions, there are certain skills every student needs to be a successful employee, and those include communication skills—specifically, oral and interpersonal communication (Coffelt, Baker, & Corey, 2016). These findings explain why people who major in communication outpace other college graduates in being hired within 6 months of graduation (Collins, 2016).

Leaders of organizations such as FedEx and GlaxoSmithKline list communication as a vital skill for their employees (O'Hair & Eadie, 2009). The pivotal role of communication in health care makes it unsurprising that an increasing number of medical schools base admissions, in part, on applicants' communication skills, especially their ability to communicate empathy to patients (Rosenbaum, 2011).

In this chapter, we take a first look at interpersonal communication. We start by identifying the ways in which interpersonal communication meets important human needs. Next, we define interpersonal communication and provide a model of how it works. Then we discuss the principles of effective interpersonal communication and consider how social media affect interpersonal communication. To close the chapter, we identify guidelines for achieving competence in interpersonal communication.

THE INTERPERSONAL IMPERATIVE

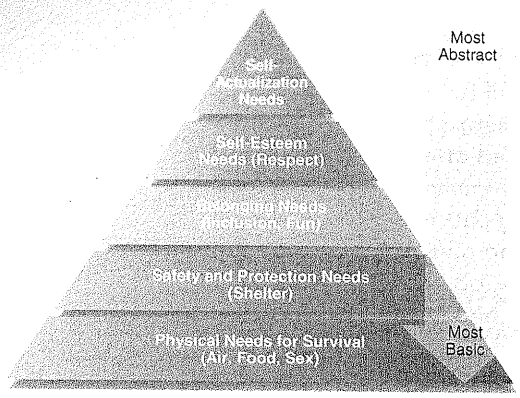


Figure 1.1

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Have you ever thought about why you communicate? Psychologist William Schutz (1966) developed interpersonal needs theory, which asserts that we create and sustain relationships to meet three basic needs. The first need is for affection, which is a desire to give and receive love and liking. The second need is for inclusion, which is a desire to be social and to be included in groups. The third need is for control, which is a desire to influence the people and events in our lives.

Expanding on Schutz's ideas, Abraham Maslow (1968) proposed that we communicate to meet a range of human needs. According to Maslow, basic needs must be satisfied before we can focus on those that are more abstract (see Figure 1.1).

Physical Needs

At the most basic level, humans need to survive, and communication helps us meet this need. Babies cry to alert others when they are hungry or in pain or danger. Beyond survival, children need interaction if they are to thrive. As we grow older, we continue to rely on communication to survive and to thrive. Good communication between doctors and patients is related to effective treatment and to patients' physical health (Fleishman, Sherbourne, & Crystal, 2000). Our effectiveness in communicating affects what jobs we get and how much we earn to pay for medical care, food, leisure activities, and housing.

Furthermore, researchers have amassed impressive evidence to document the close link between physical health and relationships with others (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2009). College students who are in committed relationships have fewer mental health problems and are less likely to be obese (Braithwaite, Delevi, & Fincham, 2010), cancer patients who are married live longer than cancer patients who are single ("A Lifesaving Side to Marriage," 2016; "Cancer," 2009), and people who lack close emotional connections with others are more likely to have heart attacks and strokes ("Loneliness Hurts the Heart," 2016) or develop dementia than are people who have strong relationships (Brody, 2013). So important is the connection between meaningful interpersonal relationships and health that doctors John Cacioppo and William Patrick (2009) assert that "social isolation has an impact on health comparable to the effect of high blood pressure, lack of exercise, obesity, or smoking" (p. 5). Given this information, it is unsurprising that people who have strong social connections live almost 4 years longer than people with weaker social ties (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010).

Safety Needs

We also use communication to meet safety needs. If your roof is leaking or if termites have invaded your apartment, you must talk with the property manager to get the problem solved so that you have safe shelter. If someone is threatening you, you need to talk with authorities to gain protection. If you take the car keys from a friend who has been drinking and say, "I'll drive you home," you may save a life. We go online to research health problems we have.

My mom is a worrier, and she was really concerned when I decided to come to this big school instead of the one near home. She calls me like five times a day just to ask what I'm doing and if I'm okay. I get on her case about that a lot, but I really like knowing she stays in touch and always has my back.

Communication also helps protect us from dangers and harm. When foods are determined to be unsafe, news media inform the public. When defects in cars and other products are discovered, recalls are issued. Residents in communities with toxic waste dumps rely on social networks to organize and then communicate with officials and media to call attention to environmental toxins that endanger their safety. After the tragic shootings at several schools, many campuses around the country developed plans for email alerts and sirens to warn students of any dangers.

Belonging Needs

The third level in Maslow's hierarchy is belonging, or social, needs. All of us want to feel that we fit in our work and social groups. We want others' company, acceptance, and affirmation, and we want to give companionship, acceptance, and affirmation to others. The painful feeling of being excluded or rejected is often described as being "frozen out" or getting the "cold shoulder." It turns out that the cold sensation is not just metaphorical but is real. Researchers Hans Ijzerman and Justin Saddlemyer (2012) found that our body temperature drops when we feel excluded.

The connection between belonging needs and health is well established. People who are deprived of human interaction over a long time may fail to develop a concept of themselves as humans. The "Communication in Everyday Life: Diversity" feature summarizes two dramatic cases of social isolation. The first case is that of Victor, a wild boy found in France in 1800; the second case is that of Ramu, or "*Ghadya ka Bacha*," the "wolf boy" (Gerstein, 1998; Shattuck, 1994). Doctors who examined Ramu concluded that he was a feral child, which means he was raised in the wild with little or no human contact. As a result, he did not have a sense of himself as a person or a human being. His self-concept and self-esteem were shaped by those with whom he interacted, presumably wolves.

Communication in Everyday Life

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social Networking on the Job

For years, employers discouraged workers from social networking while on the job, but now many employers are encouraging it. Social text and Microsoft SharePoint 2010 are two of the leaders in online social tools for the workplace. Interactive online platforms allow employees to create and maintain their own profile pages with personal information, photos, and information such as birthday and college attended. Rather than having "friends," they have "colleagues." They can post real-time status updates on their profile page and participate on internal wikis that allow team collaboration (Swift, 2010).

Do you agree that social networking at work is good for workers and employers?

Two other cases are documented by sociologist Kingsley Davis (1940, 1947). Anna and Isabelle, two girls who were not related to one another, received minimal human contact and care during the first 6 years of their lives. Authorities who discovered the children reported that both girls lived in dark, dank attics. Anna and Isabelle were so undeveloped intellectually that they behaved like 6-month-olds. Anna was startlingly apathetic and unresponsive to others. She did not progress well despite care, contact, and nutrition. She died 4 years after she was discovered. Isabelle fared better. When she was found, she communicated by grunts and gestures and was responsive to human interaction. After 2 years in systematic therapy, Isabelle's intelligence approached normal levels for her age.

How do we explain the difference between these two isolated children and what happened to them? There was one major difference. Anna was left alone all the time and had no human contact. Food was periodically put in her room, but nobody talked to her or played with her. Isabelle, on the other hand, shared her space with her mother, who was deaf and mute. The family had renounced both of them and sequestered them in an attic.

Although Isabelle didn't have the advantage of normal family interaction, she did have contact with her mother. Because the mother was deaf and mute, she couldn't teach Isabelle to speak, but she did teach Isabelle to interact with gestures and sounds that both of them understood. Thus, Isabelle suffered less extreme deprivation than Anna.

Self-Esteem Needs

Moving up Maslow's hierarchy, we find self-esteem needs, which involve valuing and respecting ourselves and being valued and respected by others. As we will see in Chapter 2, communication is the primary way we figure out who we are and who we can be. We gain our first sense of self from others who communicate how they see us. Parents and other family members tell children they are pretty or plain, smart or slow, good or bad, helpful or difficult, and so forth. As family members communicate their perceptions, children begin to form images of themselves.

This process continues throughout life as we see ourselves reflected in others' eyes. In elementary school, our teachers and peers influence our perceptions of how

smart we are, how good we are at soccer, and how attractive we are. Later, friends and romantic partners reflect their views of us as loving or unloving, generous or selfish, open or closed, and trustworthy or untrustworthy. In professional life, our coworkers and supervisors communicate in ways that suggest how much they respect us and our abilities. Through all the stages of our lives, our self-esteem is shaped by how others communicate with us.

Self-Actualization Needs

According to Maslow, the most abstract human need is self-actualization. Maslow (1954/1970) defined *self-actualization* as fully developing and using our unique "talents, capacities, potentialities" (p. 150). To achieve this, we need to refine talents that we have and cultivate new potentials in ourselves. As humans, we seek more than survival, safety, belonging, and esteem. We also thrive on growth. Each of us wants to cultivate new dimensions of mind, heart, and spirit. We seek to enlarge our perspectives, engage in challenging and different experiences, learn new skills, and test ourselves in unfamiliar territories.

Communication fosters our personal growth. Therapists can be powerful resources in helping us identify our potentials. Friends, family, coworkers, and teachers can help us recognize promise in ourselves that we otherwise might not see. Adam recalls how such a person affected him in his first job.

Communication in Everyday Life

DIVERSITY

Missing Socialization

Most of us take socialization for granted. We are born into families, and they socialize us as members of the human world of meaning and action. But what if there were no humans around to socialize you? Would you still be human? The question of what it means to be human is at the heart of two extraordinary stories of "wild children" who appear to have grown up without human contact (Douthwaite, 2002; Gerstein, 1998; Shattuck, 1994).

The first case took place in 1800. One day, French hunters found a strange creature in the woods. They were unsure what the creature was—perhaps a wild pig or monkey, they thought. The hunters tied the creature to a pole and brought it out of the woods for villagers to see. Quickly, it was determined that the creature was a human boy—filthy, naked, mute, and wild, but human nonetheless. When scientists were consulted, they said the boy was severely mentally disabled and unteachable. However, Jean-Marc Gaspard Itard disagreed. He was a young doctor who devoted many years to trying to socialize the wild boy, whom he named Victor. Itard was not successful, perhaps because Victor had missed human socialization during a critical developmental period early in life. The story of Victor is portrayed in François Truffaut's film *The Wild Child*.

A second case occurred in India in the middle of the 20th century. A young, naked, starving boy found his way to the hospital at Balrampur, India. He showed no ability to interact with people and had heavy calluses as though he moved on all fours. In addition, there were scars on the boy's neck as though he had been dragged by animals. The boy, named Ramu by the hospital staff, spent most of his time playing with a stuffed animal, as a wild animal might in its lair. He showed no interest in communicating; indeed, he seemed to feel no connection with other people. Ramu howled when he smelled raw meat in the hospital kitchen more than 100 yards from his room—far too great a distance for the human sense of smell to detect a scent. Ramu also didn't eat like a human; he tore meat apart and lapped milk from a container. Most of the doctors and scientists who examined Ramu concluded that he was a "wolf boy"—"*Ghadya ka Bacha*" in the Hindi language—who had grown up in the wild and had been socialized by wolves.

Would you say Ramu was a wolf, a boy, or something else?

ADAM

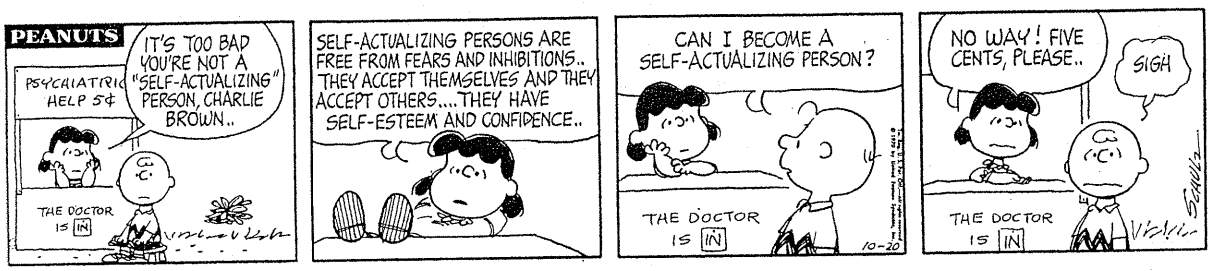
Mr. Bentley really helped me when I had my first job. It wasn't much—just serving at a sandwich shop—but he mentored me. He noticed I was awkward interacting with people, and he said I could learn social skills. He showed me how to be more effective—how to make customers feel comfortable, how to notice subtle cues that they needed something. Before that job, I'd thought of myself as kind of an introvert, somebody not very good with people. But Mr. Bentley saw a possibility in me that I hadn't seen in myself, and, as a result, I developed social skills and confidence that I never had before.

Another way in which we seek personal growth is by experimenting with new versions of ourselves. For this, too, we rely on communication. Sometimes we talk with friends about ways we want to grow or with coworkers about ways we want to advance professionally. At other times, we try out new styles of identity without telling anyone what we're doing. Some people experiment with their identities online where visual cues won't expose their real race, sex, age, or other characteristics. Lashelle's commentary stresses the importance of feedback from others in actualizing our potential.

LASHELLE

A person who changed my life was Mrs. Dickenson, my high school history teacher. She thought I was really smart, and she helped me see myself that way. I'd never considered myself all that intelligent, and I sure hadn't thought I would go to college, but Mrs. Dickenson helped me to see a whole new image of who I could be. She stayed after school a lot of days to talk to me about my future and to help me get ready for the SAT. If it weren't for her, I wouldn't be in college now.

Others also help us self-actualize through inspiration and teaching. Mother Teresa was well known for inspiring others to be generous, compassionate, and giving. She had the ability to see the best in others and to help them see it in themselves. Mohandas Gandhi embodied the principle of nonviolent resistance so gracefully and effectively that he inspired thousands of Indians to define themselves as nonviolent resisters. Years later, in the United States, the Reverend Martin


PEANUTS
PSYCHIATRIC HELP 5¢
IT'S TOO BAD YOU'RE NOT A "SELF-ACTUALIZING" PERSON, CHARLIE BROWN..
THE DOCTOR IS IN
SELF-ACTUALIZING PERSONS ARE FREE FROM FEARS AND INHIBITIONS.. THEY ACCEPT THEMSELVES AND THEY ACCEPT OTHERS....THEY HAVE SELF-ESTEEM AND CONFIDENCE..
CAN I BECOME A SELF-ACTUALIZING PERSON?
THE DOCTOR IS IN
10-20
NO WAY! FIVE CENTS, PLEASE..
SIGH
THE DOCTOR IS IN
SCHULZ

Luther King Jr. followed Gandhi's example with his nonviolent resistance of racism. Spiritual leaders such as Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, Moses, and Muhammad also inspire people to grow personally. As we interact with teachers and leaders who inspire us, we may come to understand their visions of the world and of themselves, and we may weave them into our own self-concepts.

Purestock/Jupiter

Participating Effectively in a Diverse Society

In our era, the likelihood of meeting the needs Maslow discussed depends on our ability to participate effectively in a very diverse social world. Western culture includes people of different ethnicities, gender identities, social classes, sexual orientations, ages, spiritual commitments, and abilities. The United States is becoming increasingly diverse. In 2009, almost 49% of births in the United States were minorities, and 48.3% of children below 5 years were minorities (Nasser & Overberg, 2010). In 2010, Caucasians made up 64% of the population, but by 2050 there will be no majority race in the United States (Cooper, 2012; Yen, 2012). A total of 17% of marriages in the United States now involve people of different races or ethnicities (*Noted*, 2017).

Nearly half first-year students at colleges and universities say that learning about other cultures is essential or very important (Hoover, 2010). Research also shows that exposure to students from a range of backgrounds is one of the best predictors of whether first-year college students return for a second year (Berrett, 2011). Classrooms with students of different races and ethnicities increase cognitive and personal development and enhance critical thinking skills (St. John, 2016).

Most of us realize that we expand intellectually and personally when we engage people who differ in background, ethnicity, age, and so forth. Dante notes the importance of this type of communication.

DANTE

> My friend Bobby is about as different from me as a person could get. He's black; I'm white. He's from a big city; I grew up on a farm. He's liberal politically; I'm conservative. That's what I like about Bobby—he doesn't see a lot of things the way I do. When we talk, we often start out at different points, but we listen to each other and each of us learns other ways of looking at things.

Understanding and interacting with diverse people is also critical to success in professional life (St. John, 2016). Today's and tomorrow's employers think it is very important for employees to be able to interact effectively with different kinds of people. Job applicants who can do this have a keen advantage.

Communication in Everyday Life

DIVERSITY

Communicating in a Multicultural World

Communicating effectively with diverse people begins with learning how people in different cultures view communication and actually practice it. One excellent resource for learning more is the website of the Society for Cross-Cultural Research. In addition to presenting a wealth of good information, the site provides links to many other intercultural communication sites.

Go to the Society for Cross-Cultural Research's website: http://www.sccr.org/.

Communicating comfortably and effectively with diverse people is also essential to career success as organizations become increasingly global and diverse. The Cornell University library site, focused on workplace diversity, offers links to other sites: http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/library/research/subjectGuides/workplaceDiversity.html

Understanding and adapting to social diversity is critical to professional success and even to professional competence (Allen, 2016). Doctors, for instance, need to realize that some Hispanic patients are reassured by eye contact, whereas some patients from traditional Asian backgrounds are uneasy when looked at directly. Social workers need to understand that many people of Spanish and Asian heritage have extended families that are much larger than most Caucasian families. Former global media coordinator for the United Nations states that people involved in global businesses must be able to recognize and adapt to different communication styles or they will fail (Alaimo, 2016).

In summary, interpersonal communication meets human needs ranging from survival to self-actualization and interacting with a diversity of people. Of course, our ability to meet our needs depends on the effectiveness of our interpersonal communication. That is why the rest of this chapter elaborates what interpersonal communication is and identifies principles that enhance effectiveness.

DEFINING INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

When asked to distinguish interpersonal communication from communication in general, many people say that interpersonal communication involves fewer people, often just two. According to this definition, an exchange between a homeowner and a plumber would be interpersonal, but a conversation involving parents and four children would not. Although interpersonal communication often involves only two or three people, this isn't a useful definition.

Perhaps you are thinking that intimate contexts define interpersonal communication. Using this standard, we would say that a couple on a first date in a romantic restaurant engages in more interpersonal communication than an established couple in a shopping mall. Again, this context is not the key.

The best way to define interpersonal communication is by focusing on what happens between people, not where they are or how many are present. For starters, then, we can say that interpersonal communication is a distinct type of interaction between people.

A Communication Continuum

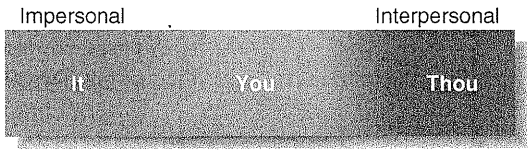


Figure 1.2
The Communication Continuum

We can begin to understand the unique character of interpersonal communication by tracing the meaning of the word *interpersonal*. It is derived from the prefix *inter-*, meaning "between," and the word *person*; interpersonal communication literally occurs between people. In one sense, all communication happens between people, yet many interactions don't involve us personally. Communication exists on a continuum from impersonal to interpersonal (see Figure 1.2).

Much of our communication is not really personal. Sometimes we don't acknowledge others as people at all but treat them as objects; they bag our groceries, direct us around highway construction, and so forth. In other instances, we do acknowledge people, yet we interact with them on a surface level and often in terms of their social roles rather than personally. For instance, I often run into neighbors when I'm walking my dog, Cassie. We engage in small talk about weather and home projects. Through this kind of interaction, we acknowledge each other as people, but we don't get really personal. With a select few people, we communicate in deeply intimate ways. These distinctions are captured in poetic terms by the philosopher Martin Buber (1970), who distinguished between I–It and I–Thou levels of communication. Later scholars added a third level, I–You.

I-It Communication In an I–It relationship, we treat others very impersonally, almost as objects. In **I–It communication**, we do not acknowledge the humanity of other people; we may not even affirm their existence. Sometimes we do not treat salespeople, servers in restaurants, and clerical staff as people but only as instruments to take our orders and deliver what we want. In the extreme form of I–It relationships, others are not even acknowledged. When a homeless person asks for money for food, some people look away as if the person weren't there. In dysfunctional families, parents may ignore children and refuse to speak to them, thereby treating the

Communication in Everyday Life

WORKPLACE

Diagnosis: Cultural Miscommunication

If you plan a career in the field of health, learn all you can about different cultures. Patients' cultural beliefs and values affect how they perceive medical practitioners and how they can be most effectively treated. Consider a few examples of cultural misunderstandings (Fadiman, 1997; Galanti, 2014).

Some Asian cultures practice *coining*, in which a coin (often heated) is rubbed vigorously over a sick person's back to draw out the illness. The resulting red welts are perceived as evidence that the illness came out. However, on seeing red welts on children's backs, some American health professionals have had Asian parents investigated for child abuse.

American culture emphasizes autonomy and each person's right to information about herself or himself. As a result, physicians routinely share a poor prognosis directly with patients before discussing it with other family members. However in places such as Mexico, China, Iran, and the Philippines, it is considered extremely insensitive to burden a person, particularly a sick person, with bad news. Instead, family members should be told, and they, not the physician, decide when and how to tell the patient.

One hospital got a lesson in cultural values when it tried to assign a patient to Room 4. In the patient's home country, China, the character for *4* is pronounced almost identically to the character for the word *death*. The Chinese patient did not want to be in a room called "Death"!

Do you think training in intercultural communication should be required as part of medical school?

children as things—as "its"—not as unique individuals. Students on large campuses may also feel they are treated as "its," not as people. Jason, a sophomore in one of my classes, makes this point.

> At this school, I get treated like a number a lot of the time. When I go to see my adviser, he asks what my identification number is—not what my name is. Most of my professors don't know my name. In high school, all the teachers called on us by name. It felt more human there. Sometimes I feel like an "it" on this campus.

I-You Communication The second level of communication is **I–You communication**, which accounts for the majority of our interactions. People acknowledge one another as more than objects, but they don't fully engage each other as unique individuals. For example, suppose you go shopping, and a salesclerk asks, "May I help you?" It's unlikely you will have a deep conversation with the clerk, but you might treat him or her as more than an object (Wood, 2006a). Perhaps you say, "I'm just browsing today. You know how it is at the end of the month—no money." The clerk might laugh and commiserate about how money gets tight by the end of the month. In this interaction, the clerk doesn't treat you as a faceless shopper, and you don't treat the clerk as just an agent of the store.

I–You relationships may also be more personal than interactions with salesclerks. For instance, we talk with others in classes, on the job, and on sports teams in ways that are somewhat personal. The same is true of interaction in Internet forums, where people meet to share ideas and common interests. Interaction is still guided by our roles as peers, as members of a class or team, and as people who have common interests. Yet we do affirm the existence of others and recognize them as individuals within those roles. Teachers and students often have I–You relationships. In the workplace, most of us have many I–You relationships that are pleasant and functional.

I-Thou Communication The rarest kind of relationship involves **I–Thou communication**. Buber regarded this as the highest form of human dialogue because each person affirms the other as cherished and unique. When we interact on an I–Thou level, we meet others in their wholeness and individuality. Instead of dealing with them as occupants of social roles, we see them as unique human beings whom we know and accept in their totality. In I–Thou communication, we open ourselves fully, trusting others to accept us as we are, with our virtues and vices, hopes and fears, and strengths and weaknesses.

Buber believed that only in I–Thou relationships do we become fully human, which for him meant that we discard the guises and defenses we use most of the time and allow ourselves to be completely genuine (Stewart, 1986). Much of our communication involves what Buber called "seeming," in which we're preoccupied with our image and careful to manage how we present ourselves. In I–Thou relationships, however, we engage in "being," through which we reveal who we really are and how we really feel. I–Thou relationships are not common because we can't afford to reveal ourselves totally to everyone all the time. Thus, I–Thou relationships and the communication in them are rare and special.

Features of Interpersonal Communication

Building on Buber's poetic description, we can define **interpersonal communication** as a selective, systemic process that allows people to reflect and build personal knowledge of one another and create shared meanings. We'll discuss each key term in this definition.

Selective First, as we noted earlier, we don't communicate intimately with the majority of people we encounter. In some cases, we neither want nor need to communicate with others even at the I–You level. For instance, if we get a phone call from a pollster, we may only respond to the questions and not engage the caller in any personal way. We invest the effort and take the risks of opening ourselves fully with only a few people. As Buber realized, most of our communication occurs on I–It or I–You levels. This is fine because I–Thou relationships take more time, energy, and courage than we are willing to offer to everyone.

Systemic Interpersonal communication is also **systemic**, which means that it takes place within various systems, or contexts, that influence what happens and the meanings we attribute to interaction. The communication between you and me right now is embedded in multiple systems, including the interpersonal communication course you are taking, our academic institutions, and American society. Each of these systems influences what we expect of each other, what I write, and how you interpret what you read. Communication between me and Chinese students taking a class in interpersonal communication would reflect the context of Chinese culture.

Consider an example of the systemic character of communication. Suppose Ian gives Mia a solid gold pendant and says, "I wanted to show how much I care about you." What do his words mean? That depends in large part on the systems within which he and Mia interact. If Ian and Mia have just started dating, an expensive gift means one thing; if they have been married for 20 years, it means something different. On the other hand, if they don't have an established relationship, and Mia is engaged to Manuel, Ian's gift may have yet another meaning. What if Ian argued with Mia the previous day? Then, perhaps, the gift symbolizes an apology. If Ian is rich, a solid gold pendant may be less impressive than if he is short on cash. Systems that affect what this communication means include Mia's and Ian's relationship, their socioeconomic classes, cultural norms for gift giving, and Mia's and Ian's personal histories. All these contexts affect their interaction and its meaning.

Because interpersonal communication is systemic, situation, time, people, culture, personal histories, and so on interact to affect meanings. We can't just add up the various parts of a system to understand their impact on communication. Instead, we have to recognize that all parts of a system interact; each part affects all others. In other words, elements of communication systems are interdependent; each element is tied to all the other elements.

All systems include **noise**, which is anything that distorts communication or interferes with people's understandings of one another. Noise in communication systems is inevitable, but we can be aware that it exists and try to compensate for the difficulties it causes.

There are four kinds of noise. *Physiological noise* is distraction caused by hunger, fatigue, headaches, drugs, and other factors that affect how we feel and think. *Physical noise* is interference in our environments, such as sounds made by others, overly dim or bright lights, spam and pop-up ads, extreme temperatures, and crowded conditions. *Psychological noise* refers to thoughts and feelings that affect how we communicate and how we interpret others. For instance, if you are preoccupied with a problem, you may be inattentive at a team meeting. Likewise, prejudice and defensive feelings can interfere with communication. Our needs may also affect how we interpret others. For example, if we really need affirmation of our professional competence, we may be predisposed to perceive others as communicating more praise for our work than they really do. Finally, *semantic noise* exists when words themselves are not mutually understood. Authors sometimes create semantic noise by using jargon or unnecessarily technical language. For instance, to discuss noise, I could write, "Communication can be egregiously obstructed by phenomena extrinsic to an exchange that actuate misrepresentations and symbolic incongruities." Although that sentence may be accurate, it's filled with semantic noise. Similarly, the abbreviations typical in texts and tweets may not be understood by people who use social media infrequently.

I wish professors would learn about semantic noise. I really try to pay attention in class and to learn, but the way some faculty talk makes it impossible to understand what they mean, especially if English is a second language. I wish they would remember that we're not specialists like they are, so we don't know all the technical words.

Some noise is of more than one type. Listening to your favorite music on your iPod while walking across campus creates both physical noise and psychological noise. Social media can be so distracting that people have accidents. One survey found that 1,000 people visited emergency rooms in a single year because they tripped, fell, or walked into something while using a cell phone to talk or text (Richtel, 2010).

In summary, when we say that communication is systemic, we mean three things. First, all communication occurs within multiple systems that affect meanings. Second, all parts and all systems of communication are interdependent, so they affect one another. Third, all communication systems have noise, which can be physiological, physical, psychological, or semantic.

Process Interpersonal communication is an ongoing, continuous **process.** This means, first, that communication evolves over time, becoming more personal as people interact. Friendships and romantic relationships gain depth and significance over the course of time, and they may also decline in quality over time. Relationships on the job also evolve over time. Ellen may mentor Craig when he starts working at her firm, but over time they may become equal colleagues. Because relationships are dynamic, they don't stay the same but continually change.

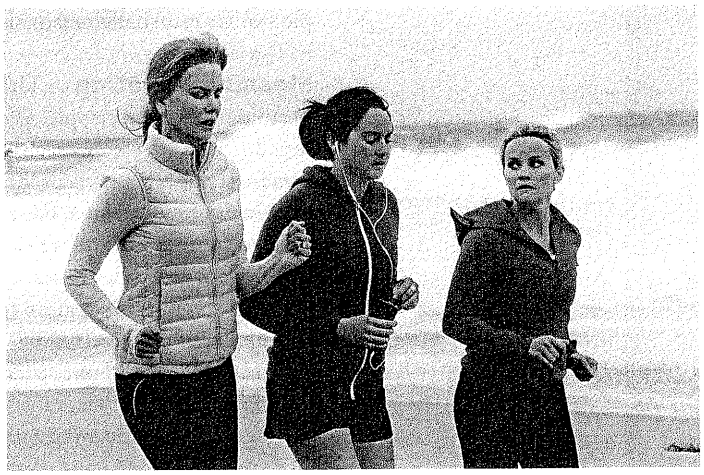
My daughter is my best friend, but it wasn't always that way. As a child, she was very shy and dependent. She was a sullen teenager who resented everything I said and did. Now that she's 22, we've become really good friends. But even now, our relationship has all of the echoes of who we were with each other at different times in our lives.

JANA

An ongoing process also has no discrete beginnings and endings. Suppose a friend stops by and confides in you about a troubling personal problem. When did that communication begin? Although it may seem to have started when the friend came by, earlier interactions may have led the friend to feel that it was safe to talk to you and that you would care about the problem. We can't be sure, then, when this communication began. Similarly, we don't know where it will end. Perhaps it ends when the friend leaves, but perhaps it doesn't. Maybe your response to the problem helps your friend see new options. Maybe what you learn changes how you feel toward your friend. Because communication is ongoing, we can never be sure when it begins or ends.

Because interpersonal interaction is a process, what happens between people is linked to both past and future. In our earlier example, the meaning of Ian's gift reflects prior interactions between him and Mia, and their interaction about the gift will affect future interactions. All our communication occurs in three temporal dimensions: past, which affects what happens now; present, which reflects the past and sets the stage for the future; and future, which is molded by what occurs in this moment and past ones (Wood, 2006a). How couples handle early arguments affects how they deal with later ones. Yesterday's text from a friend influences what you text today and, in turn, what your friend texts back tomorrow. In communication, past, present, and future are always interwoven.

The ongoing quality of interpersonal communication also suggests that we can't stop the process, nor can we edit or unsay what has been said. In this sense, communication is irreversible: We can't take it back. This implies that we have an ethical responsibility to recognize the irreversibility of communication and to communicate carefully.



Pictorial Press Ltd/Alamy Stock Photo

Relationships between characters in "Big Little Lies" have evolved over the course of the series.

Personal Knowledge Interpersonal communication fosters personal knowledge and insights. To connect as unique individuals, we have to get to know others personally and understand their thoughts and feelings. With family members whom you have known all of your life, you understand some of their worries, concerns, and personal issues in ways that new acquaintances cannot. Longtime friends have a history of shared experiences and knowledge that allows them to interact more deeply than casual friends can.

Just as every person is unique, so is every interpersonal relationship. Each develops its own distinctive patterns and even special vocabulary that are not part of

other interpersonal relationships (Nicholson, 2006). In the process of becoming close, people work out personal roles and rules for interaction, and these may deviate from general social rules and roles (Dainton, 2006; Duck, 2006; Wood, 2006a). With one friend, you might play pickup basketball and get together for films. With a different, equally close friend, you might talk openly about feelings.

As our relationships with others deepen, we build trust and learn how to communicate in ways that make each other feel comfortable and safe. The personal knowledge we gain over time in relationships encourages us to know and be known: We share secrets, fears, and experiences that we don't tell to just anyone. This is part of what Buber meant by "being" with others. Personal knowledge is a process, one that grows and builds on itself over time as people communicate interpersonally. Sometimes, we may even feel that our closest friends know us better than we know ourselves, as Lizelle explains.

> What I like best about long-term relationships is all the layers that develop. I know the friends I've had since high school in so many ways. I know what they did and felt and dreamed in high school, and I know them as they are now. They have the same kind of in-depth knowledge of me. We tell each other everything, so it sometimes seems that my deepest friends know me better than I know myself.

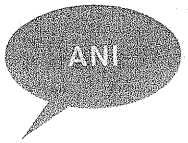
Sharing personal information and experiences means that interpersonal communication involves ethical choices. We can use our knowledge to protect people we care about. We can also use it to hurt those people, for example, by attacking vulnerabilities others have revealed to us. Ethical communicators choose not to exploit or treat casually personal information about others.

Meaning Creating The heart of interpersonal communication is shared meanings between people. We don't merely exchange words when we communicate. Instead, we create meanings as we figure out what each other's words and behaviors stand for, represent, or imply. Meanings grow out of histories of interaction between unique persons. For example, my partner, Robbie, and I are both continually overcommitted, and we each worry about the pace of the other's life. Often, one of us says to the other, "*bistari, bistari.*" This phrase will mean nothing to you unless you know enough Nepalese to translate it as meaning, "Go slowly, go gradually." When one of us says, "*bistari, bistari,*" we not only suggest slowing down but also remind each other of our special time living and trekking in Nepal.

Like Robbie and me, most close friends and romantic partners develop vocabularies that have meaning only to them. People who work together also develop meanings that grow out of their interactions over time and the shared field in which they work.

You may have noted that I refer to *meanings*, not just one meaning. This is because interpersonal communication involves two levels of meaning (Rogers, 2008; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). The first level, called the **content meaning**, deals with literal, or denotative, meaning. If a parent says to a 5-year-old child, "Clean your room now," the content meaning is that the room is to be cleaned immediately.

The second level is the **relationship meaning**. This refers to what communication expresses about relationships between communicators. The relationship meaning of "Clean your room now" is that the parent has the right to order the child; the parent and child have unequal power in their relationship. If the parent says, "Would you mind cleaning your room?" the relationship meaning reflects a more equal relationship. Suppose a friend says, "You're the only person I can talk to about this," and then discloses something that is worrying him. The content level includes the actual issue itself and the information that you're the only one with whom he will discuss this issue. But what has he told you on the relationship level? He has communicated that he trusts you, he considers you special, and he probably expects you to care about his troubles.



My father needs to learn about relationship meanings. Whenever I call home, he asks me if anything's wrong. Then he asks what the news is. If I don't have news to report, he can't understand why I'm calling. Then Mom gets on the phone, and we talk for a while about stuff—nothing important, just stuff. I don't call to tell them big news. I just want to touch base and feel connected.

Cultures vary in how much they emphasize content- and relationship-level meanings. In high-context cultures, great emphasis is put on holistic understanding of meanings based on a collective understanding of context. Words themselves have little meaning until placed in the context of culture, relationships, and people. Some cultures are low-context, which means that communicators do not assume a great deal of shared, collective knowledge. Because a high level of collective knowledge is not assumed, the content level of meaning is given great priority. Words and literal meaning are emphasized and specifics are provided in conversation. The United States is a low-context culture, whereas many Asian cultures are high-context, which means that collective knowledge is assumed. In high-context cultures, less emphasis is given to content-level meaning and to providing specifics because communicators can assume that others share their collective knowledge. For example, in a low-context culture, a person might say to a coworker, "Let's get together to talk about our project. We can meet in my office at 2 P.M. today, and you can bring the draft. I'll order some coffee for us." In a high-context culture, the message might be "Let's meet at 2 P.M. to discuss our project." In the high-context culture, the communicator assumes that the coworker will share cultural understandings about where to meet, what to bring, and whether there will be a beverage (Lim, 2002).

Scholars have identified three general dimensions of relationship-level meanings. The first dimension is responsiveness, and it refers to how aware of others and involved with them we are. Perhaps you can remember a conversation you had with someone who shuffled papers and glanced at a clock or kept looking at a phone while you were talking. If so, you probably felt she wasn't interested in you or what you were saying. In Western culture, low responsiveness is communicated on the relationship level of meaning when people don't look at us, or when they are preoccupied with something other than talking with us. Higher responsiveness is communicated by eye contact, nodding, and feedback, all of which indicate involvement (Richmond & McCroskey, 2000).